

Balls to the Wall: The Pro's and Cons of Pro's

Wimbledon and Lords. Two hallowed arenas steeped in history and tradition but prepared to embrace change ... when change is necessary. Two sporting arenas etched on my "Must do" Bucket list. One day I will sit at Lords, and taste the brewed history and cut and thrust of 5- day test cricket. (Just save me from those yellow and red tied-and-jacketed fogies of the Long Room.) Let me sit amongst the commoners, but don't let them boo, and let me review the reviews and hope that Stuart Broad will one day, walk. At Wimbledon, one day, let me queue, let me stand. Let me sit, if necessary, all in white, and feel the savage pace and intimate artistry of the professional tennis players. Let me smell the sweat and the strawberries. One day, maybe, when I find a sponsor ...

Like Wimbledon and Lords, the Jarvis/ Kaplan Cup Squash Tournament is steeped in rich tradition of individuals fighting for their team in an ethos of support and camaraderie. A genuine inter-provincial where the 5 best squash men and women in each province, battle for annual supremacy. Long may the unique traditions of sharing the Champagne-filled trophy amongst participants at the Final Dinner, be continued.

In the 70's and 80's, professional players frequently visited our shores, and South African players were exposed to these different levels of play. Gradually, it became too expensive, and too far to travel, and markets elsewhere in the world were more lucrative for the professionals to visit. Gradually, South African Squash stagnated. To stop the rot, Squash SA, after much debate, introduced 2 new rules which have changed the face of their Inter-Provincial Tournaments. In fact, as it stands today, is the tournament really an Inter-provincial?

1. Players were not bound to play for the province in which they lived.

The Residential rule is ironically, geared to assist the smaller provinces whose players wander off to varsity and the bright lights. As a "feeder province", EP has always been frustrated, but also proud when juniors have grown and moved on to achieve bigger things. How good was it to see Siyoli Waters, an Eastern Cape girl, raise the National Woman's trophy? Traditionalists argued that those players who returned to their home-based provinces were actually slowing their own progress as they always had a safe haven in their home provinces. Why not battle for selection in their adopted provinces? It was also argued that by using these players, a schism was created amongst the locals who play league and tournaments, attend training and fund raise, only to be replaced by players who may have attended one or 2 qualifying events. Is the camaraderie that is built up via competing, training, and sweating together not more important? And via this, are we not building a bigger base of better players?

2. Provinces were permitted to bring 1 overseas player into their teams

As a conservative hippy with a small town chip-on-my shoulder, when the professionals were welcomed into the fold, I was vehemently against the idea. Why spend R25 000 on a professional who will fly into town, maybe a week before the inter-provincial, practise with the team, maybe play an exhibition, have a great time in sunny South Africa, and leave, leaving little, or no legacy except a, severely depleted pot of pennies. My small town chip-on-shoulder grew even bigger thinking that it was only the bigger and richer provinces who could afford the pro's, and so the rich would get richer, and the poor could never win! All was not fair. The tin was at different heights.

Surely, that money would be better spent on setting up an academy, coaching local players, or sending them to tournaments so that they could improve their own games? Were the professionals really adding value, and improving the level of squash in the province? What if the individual did not gel with the side? What about those battling at the bottom of the ladder who eventually get pushed out of the team, despite the fact that they had worked harder than most to reach the level that they had achieved? Is this not just an ego thing, to brag about a hollow, "bought" victory which is remembered for a short while? Were the real issues of the Inter-provincial were being ignored at the altar of wealth and pride?

Eastern Province Squash, normally, conservatively traditional, faced with the dilemma of embracing these changes to become more competitive, have always clung to our wooden racquets, rugby shorts and Bata tackies, and longed for the past.

This year, however, the mountains came to Mohammed. Jarvis/Kaplan came to Port Elizabeth, and squash players of all levels were treated to a level of squash, far higher than they have previously ever enjoyed. With due respect to the likes of Geoff Hunt, and Jonah Barrington who as World No 1's, showed us unbelievable levels of retrieving and control. But the game has changed, equipment has developed, retrieving, touch, racquet skills, speed, and stamina have taken the whole feel of squash to different levels. I was mesmerized. And converted to Professionalism. What a great advert, this year's crop of pros was. Humble, friendly, willing to help, willing to talk and share ideas, keen to get involved. If this is the caliber of people, bring them on. Imitation is a powerful form of learning and if international players can expose our locals and our coaches to higher levels of squash and new ideas, their presence can have sustainable and longer term effect. And maybe, just maybe, if provinces are bringing out the pro's, then the chances of a circuit being started becomes stronger and the tidbit that was tasted this year, can be spread, and become a regular treat, and maybe, a full meal, for the greater good of Squash in South Africa.

But what about EP Squash. ? After one of the best tournament performances ever, the province stares at the scary reality of having a side in the Men's A Section and 2 sides in the Ladies A Section! Do we embrace the changes, and seek the money to find a professional to re-inforce our teams?

The general feeling amongst the players seems to be that the Men, a bit like the Kings, would take on the A Section as Survivors, lacking in depth. And even with a professional, and having Greg La Mude and Mark Rogers available, they would struggle. Rather, accept our status as a B Section team, and go out and win it again next year, and the year after.

On the women's front however, EP has for so long been the Bridesmaid. Again this year, the A Side, the only side without a professional, was literally match points away from clinching 2nd spot. The 2014 reality, sadly, is that some of this year's sides will not be available next year. Some of our players will be a year older, pregnancy and an injured knee are already casting clouds and the Landman twins, Elani and Lume have already requested transfers to Gauteng .But there is depth amongst our ladies, and, Di Van Eck, Sarah O Grady, Kaycee Leigh Dodd and Kate Pearson must be licking their lips in anticipation of cutting their teeth at A Section level. Depending on availability, 2 ladies sides is still an option

So, EP Squash , will probably, like Wimbledon and Lords cling to the traditions of utilizing a totally home-grown Men's side but embrace change in seeking a top woman professional (wouldn't World No 1, Nicol David, be wonderful) in striving for that bucket-listed dream of inscribing EP's name on the 2014 Kaplan Cup. A stretching goal. An admirable goal - one which will require clever and committed fund raising, and totally unselfish committed hard work from the players.

Let it be our time to taste the smiles, tears and the sweat of victory and share the laurelled, champagne-filled Kaplan Cup amongst the losing provinces And maybe, just maybe, a sponsor, in shining armour will come riding in ...